DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 308 652 EC 220 516

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TITLE Learning Experiences for Mentally Handicapped Students in a School Store.
PUB DATE 9 Nov 88
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association (Louisville, KY, November 8-11, 1988).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Daily Living Skills; Elementary Education; *Food Stores; Money Management; *Multiple Disabilities; Parent Attitudes; *Severe Disabilities; Student Motivation; Teacher Attitudes; *Token Economy

ABSTRACT

A supermarket chain supplies a small grocery store in an elementary school in Jefferson County, Kentucky. The store program seeks to provide learning experiences for students, as they make selections, spend their earnings, and save for later purchases. Students with multiple handicaps and students with severe/profound handicaps shop in the store each week, spending their earnings from school attendance, homework completion, classwork completion, and appropriate behavior. The store serves as a motivation for some students, while at the same time it gives students an opportunity to learn appropriate behavior in a normal setting. Observations of the two groups of students showed varying degrees of independence in their shopping. Teacher interviews revealed that the school store program helped the students learn acceptable behavior skills, independent decision-making, and the value of money. A parent survey found that the majority of parents felt that their children were more interested in grocery shopping and had more knowledge of money after being involved in the school store program. (JDD)

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Learning Experiences for Mentally Handicapped Students in a School Store

by

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Paper presented at the meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association, Louisville, Kentucky, November 9, 1988

EC 220516

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Learning Experiences for Mentally Handicapped Students in a School Store

Carol David

This paper is a qualitative study of the learning experiences for mentally handicapped students in a school store. As a simulation program, a school store can provide special education students with opportunities to develop both cognitive and behaviorial skills. Through observation of the students' shopping in the school store, interviews of the three teachers, and a parent survey, this study is a presentation of possible ways the mentally handicapped students may acquire skills which they will need throughout their lives.

During the 1985-86 school year, a major supermarket chain supplied a small grocery store in one of Jefferson County Public Schools' (JCPS) elementary schools. For the regular education students, the school store provides opportunities to learn mathematics and economics. All the students at this elementary school participate in an active learning process in which they earn salaries for certain school-related behaviors. All of the students' weekly earnings are recorded in bankbooks which are sent home for the parents to sign and return to their child's teacher.

Within this particular elementary school there are two multiply handicapped classes for students with mild and moderate mental retardation, two learning disabilities classes, and one class for the severely/profoundly handicapped. The multiply handicapped class includes students with speech and language disorders and visual impairments in addition to mental retardation. The age range of these students are 6 to 12. The focus of this paper is upon these mentally handicapped students' learning experiences in the school store as they spend their earnings, make selections, and save for later purchases.

For the severely/profoundly handicapped students, the school store serves as a motivation for some, while at the same time it gives all these students an opportunity to learn appropriate behavior in a normal setting.

In a school store, students with mild to moderate mental retardation learn how to make purchases according to their needs and financial resources. In two articles, Burkett and Whitfield (1985) and Kapp (1981) discussed the practical applications of mathematics in elementary school stores. Burkett and Whitfield noted that the students whom they observed learned to apply the basic operations of arithmetic, to compute the sales tax, and to compare prices according to quantities and volume in a school store. In a special education class, the teacher could use a school store to instruct the students in various levels of mathematics, such as counting.

Kapp (1981) noted that his eighth grade students learned certain geometrical concepts, such as space, shape, and size, through working in a school store. Kapp mentioned that the students learned the efficiency of using cylindrical boxes for packaging and storing salt. Such practical applications could benefit regular education students when they study geometry and other higher mathematics. For the special education students, the teacher might indicate the various shapes and sizes of the grocery items to the students. This can reinforce skills that are useful for daily living.

Two articles specifically dealt with the use of school stores by special education students. Quinley (1986) described the experiences of his class of hearing impaired students in a simulation program. Within his class, the students had both a store and a bank. Each student had his/her own bankbook with checks and deposit slips. Quinley assigned his students to various occupational positions for which they received salaries. Through this simulated experience, the students learned to balance checkbooks and to budget.

Like Quinley's students, other special education students can learn about earning and managing money in a simulation program.

In another article, Ellington (1976) discussed the operation of a point system and a small store in her class of mentally handicapped students. Ellington stated that her students earned points for both good behavior and the completion of daily assignments and that her students could exchange their points for both various items in the store and certain activities, such as painting, playing the tape recorder or writing on the blackboard. Ellington observed that her students seemed to have developed more responsibility and better self-concepts when they were involved in the class store.

Such practical experiences in simulation programs can be conducive to the mentally handicapped students' learning appropriate behavior. Wheeler, Bates, Marshall and Miller (1988) contended that many mentally handicapped adults are terminated from employment because of inappropriate behavior and poor interpersonal skills. These authors cited a case study of a young man with Down's Syndrome. Through an intensive on-job self-management program with instruction in social skills and a self-management checklist, several trainers were successful in reducing this young man's inappropriate behaviors. Such studies as this one indicate the benefits of developing the social and cognitive skills of mentally handicapped individuals in normalized settings.

For studying the performances of mentally handicapped students in such a simulated situation as a school store, qualitative research methods are appropriate. Murray, Anderson, Bersani and Meadows (1986) stated that qualitative analysis is relevant to special education because discriptive data about handicapped persons in various natural settings can generate new hypotheses, such qualitative data could contribute to the development of new educational techniques, and through qualitative methodology the types of

data collected are differect from that used in quantitative analysis. These authors, therefore, recommended that special education researchers become more familiar with qualitative research methodology. For the above mentioned reasons and the inability to measure the mentally handicapped students' performances in a school store with standardized instruments, this study of the school store at this JCPS elementary school only involved qualitative methods.

The ways the mentally handicapped students used the school store differed according to their disabilities. For example, the multiply handicapped students earned their salaries for attendance, homework completion, classwork completion, and appropriate school-related behavior as did the regular education students. The salaries of the severely/profoundly handicapped were based upon their Individualized Education Plan (I.E.P.) goals. The following sections present the findings of the observations of the mentally handicapped students in the school store, teacher interviews, and survey of parents concerning the impact of the school store for these students.

Observations

Like the regular education students, the special education students had a half hour to shop every week at a specified time. The two multiply handicapped classes and one severely/profoundly handicapped classes were observed in May 1988 as they shopped in the school store. This section is a discussion of the ways the two groups shopped in the school store.

When it was the multiply handicapped students' time to shop, eight students entered the store. All but one were ambulatory. The teacher's aide handed each student his/her bankbook and told each student what she/he had to spend that particular day. The students walked around the store to find what they wanted to purchase.

Most students had enough money to buy more than one item.

After these students made their selections, they took the items to the check-out counter. Examples of these students' purchases included water colors, pencils, fruit drinks, jars of pickles, granola bars, animal crackers, pet food, a can of tuna fish and macaroni and cheese, while this class were shopping, the teacher's aide pointed out to the students that there was a two-for-one sale on macaroni and cheese, but only one student took advantage of the sale. Only one student was told at the check-out counter that she did not have enough to buy everything she could afford. So she returned a granola bar to the shelf. When the students had finished shopping, the teacher's aide commented that most of these students know what they want but they need assistance in buying what they can afford.

As would be expected, the severely/profoundly handicapped students needed more assistance from the teacher and teacher's aide when they shopped in the store. When it was time for this class to shop, the teacher held the hand of one student as she walked in the store. They walked around the store together. Then the teacher picked up a bar of soap and held it near the student so that she could smell it. He said to her, "Smell the soap, Nancy." Later the teacher helped Nancy select Spanish peanuts, graham crackers, and Fun Fruit. When Nancy made an inappropriate sound, the teacher took her hand and said, "No. No."

The teacher's aide wheeled Frank around the store although Frank did not shop because his parents had not signed and returned his bankbook that week. The teacher commented that this class followed the school rule that all students must return their bankbooks signed by their parents before they could shop in the school store. The teacher added that Frank would not be penalized since he would be able to spend all of his earnings the following week.

Ken walked into the store and took a grocery cart. Another teacher's aide assisted him as he wheeled it around. She helped him select a box of Kraft macaroni and cheese and a box of animal crackers. After Ken finished checking out, the teacher's aide put Ken's purchases in a bag.

Next the teacher wheeled Anne into the store. They went around the store and stopped at the canned fruit section. The teacher showed Anne various types of fruit by holding up cans of each in front of her. Anne indicated that she wanted a can of pears by smiling. Then the teacher helped Anne choose a small box of Q-tips. With her remaining fifty cents, the teacher gave her a choice between Jello pudding and a can of pineapple. Anne chose the pineapple before she checked out.

Obviously, the multiply handicapped students and the severely/profoundly handicapped students showed varying degrees of independence when shopping in the school store. With the severely/profoundly handicapped class, the teacher and teacher's aides gave more assitance to these students as they made their purchases. The following section is a discussion of these three special education teachers' perceptions of their students' learning activities in the school store.

Teacher Interviews

All three special education teachers were interviewed in May 1988. Ms. A and Ms. B taught the multiply handicapped students, while Mr. C taught severely/profoundly handicapped class. Ms. A taught at this school four years, one year prior to the school store's opening; Ms. B taught at this school during the three years of the store's operation; and Mr. C was at the school for two years.

Ms. A stated that three of her eight students had been in her class all three years of the school store's operation, while Ms. B said all eight students were in her class during the three school years. Both teachers agreed that the students who had been in these classes all three years were more familiar with the store's operation and its merchandise than those who were in their classes one or two years. Ms. A commented that her students sometimes knew exactly what they wanted to buy in the school store.

Both multiply handicapped classes used the same bankbook with the same behavioral goals as the regular education classes. Ms. B noted that her class shopped with real money. She loaned the class twenty dollars which constantly circulated and which was returned to her at the end of the school year. Thus, her students learned to shop with real money.

Both of these teachers were positive concerning what their students had learned from their involvement in the school store. They stated that their students were aware of the connection between behavior and reinforcement and that their students learned the value of money by earning and saving it. Ms. B concluded that, by learning to select merchandise and to make change, her students were able to develop independence.

For the severly/profoundly handicapped students, however, the school store served different educational purposes. Mr. C observed that unlike the other students at this elementary school the store was a normalizing experience and a system of reinforcement for his students. Mr. C's four students' earnings were based upon their I.E.P. goals which were different for each of the four students. According to Mr. C, some of these students' goals were using sign language, practicing hygiene (hand washing and using napkins), and following directions.

Mr. C remarked that the store was an incentive for his one verbal student. For all four of his students, the school store was part of a reinforcement system. With their earnings, the students bought cookies or crackers which are used as primary reinforcers in class. Because of their limited attention spans, these students need immediate reinforcement.

For all of Mr. C's students, the school store provided such normalizing experiences as entering a store, pushing a grocery cart, selecting items, going through a check-out process, and leaving the store with purchases. Throughout their shopping time in the school store, the teacher and the teacher's aides prompted and guided these students.

All three special education teachers concurred about the benefits of their students' involvement in the school store program. According to Ms. A and Ms. B, the multiply handicapped students shopped in the school store in much the same ways as the regular education students although the multiply handicapped students needed some additional assistance from the teaching staff. Since Mr. C's students had no concept of money, he perceived the school store primarily as a place where his students could learn acceptable behavior skills. In conclusion, Mr. C commented that the non-handicapped students were learning to accept the handicapped because they say the special education students shopping in the school store as they did.

Parent survey

At the end of the 1987-88 school year, a survey instrument was distributed to the parents of the mentally handicapped students to ascertain their views concerning the impact of the school store for their children. Of the 20 mentally handicapped students, 14 parents responded and returned this questionnaire. According to the returned questionnaires,

13 were parents of multiply handicapped students, and 1 was the parent of a severely/profoundly handicapped student. These students' ages ranged from 6 to 10 years old.

The parent of the severely/profoundly handicapped student said that the child had been at this elementary school during all three years of the school store's operation. This parent had taken this child grocery shopping both before and after the school store had opened but had noticed that this child seemed more aware of a grocery store's surroundings although the parent stated that the child had no interest in or concept of money. This parent further commented that the child was more interested in buying food and more aware of "normal living." This parent concluded by stating that the school store gave this child more opportunities to learn appropriate behaviors in a normal setting.

The survey results for the parents of the multiply handicapped students were as follows. With regards to their children's handicapping conditions, 5 parents indicated that their child was both physically and mentally handicapped; 4 stated that their child was mentally handicapped only; 1 stated that the child was physically handicapped only; and 3 had no comment. When asked how many years their children had been at this elementary school, 8 parents stated their children attended the school all 3 years; 2 stated 2 years; and 3 stated 1 year.

The next six items on the survey concerned the parents' perceptions of the influence of the school store upon their children's learning and behavior. Of the 13 parents who returned the surveys, 12 stated that they took their children grocery shopping before the school store was in operation. After the school store was in operation, all 13 parents took their children grocery shopping. Moreover, these parents noticed both that their children

were interested in grocery shopping and that their children were even more interested in grocery shopping after the school store began operation. Of these 13 parents, 10 indicated that their children were more interested in and had more knowledge of money since they were involved in the school store program.

When asked what their children learned from the school store, these parents' responses were counting, realizing the value of money, saving and managing money, and making selections. Four of the 13 parents wrote that they noticed that their children showed more consideration for others and a greater willingness to share. Yet another parent noticed that his/her child had increased motivation and a more positive self-concept. With regards to problems, two parents wrote that their children wanted to buy more in the store than their parents were able or willing to spend.

Conclusion

This small qualitative study allows a triangulation of data sources. From observations of the multiply handicapped students' shopping in the school store, from the interviews with the three special education teachers, and from the parent surveys, there emerged some idea of the types of learning for these mentally handicapped students. First, all sources agreed that the school store provided these mentally handicapped students with opportunities to learn to function in an everyday environment. Second, as was stated by Mr. C and the only parent to respond to the survey, the principal benefit for the severely/profoundly handicapped was to stimulate interest in shopping in a store and the ability to make choices. Third, as stated by the teacher's aide during the observation of the multiply handicapped students' shopping and by two parents on the questionnaire, the only problem for the multiply

handicapped was their wanting to buy more than they had resources to spend. For a study of a specific special education program such as this one, qualitative methods are feasible and desirable for evaluating the learning which occurs.

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